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SOUTH AMERICAN HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

RELATING CHIEFLY TO THE PERIOD OF
REVOLUTION

FROM THE COLLECTION OF

GEORGE M. CORBACHO

BY

WILLIAM R. SHEPHERD

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY IN COLUMBIA
UNIVERSITY; MEMBER OF THE HIS-
PANIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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SOUTH AMERICAN HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS

In these days of rapid change, when old empires fall and new nations rise within a period of less than five years, it is hard to believe that Spain once ruled in America for three hundred. She held dominion then over the greatest realm that the world had ever known. At the time that our own country achieved its independence Spain was sovereign in a region that stretched from northwestern North America to the Straits of Magellan. Most of what is now the United States formed part of it. And, though her political sway has vanished long since, eighteen republics perpetuate her civilization. Nine of them, covering an area nearly a third again as large as the whole of the United States, are in South America alone.

Too often the nations of Spanish origin

in spite of their origin; if they remained "backward," the fault must lie in their origin just the same. Again the factor of fair comparison has been lacking, and no account has been taken of the special circumstances of environment as well as of inheritance with which their national growth has been attended.

For all of these obstacles to a real understanding of the Spanish element in the history of America failure to study the sources is largely responsible. Until quite late in the nineteenth century the archives of Spain itself were not open to private investigators. The struggle for political stability and economic advancement in its former colonies that had become republics was too arduous to permit the necessary documents to be gathered, much less to be examined. War and civil commotions scattered, where they did not actually destroy, vast quantities of manuscript records. What survived, apparently, was a meager store of material, poorly kept, difficult of access, and rarely printed in critical editions. Such at least was the

common impression, strengthened only too often by the experience of investigators. If a student wanted to consult papers in government archives, he was apt to meet discouragement from bureaucrats who cared nothing about historical documents, except to wish that so much waste paper cluttering up the office could be thrown out. Public libraries, also, were few and their facilities did not invite serious work. Private archives, in the rare cases where they were known to exist, were beyond the reach of strangers, for the families who owned them had no desire to gratify anyone's curiosity on the matter.

Given such conditions it is not strange that the writing of the history of Spanish America based on genuine research should have been rendered almost impossible. Worse still, the situation created a state of mind altogether averse to investigation, and this has subsisted to a marked extent, despite the improvements of recent years in the preservation, arrangement, and publication of the sources. Lacking the real tools of their trade, the native historians

resorted to improvisations of one sort or another. They copied lavishly and carelessly the assertions of their predecessors. Moved by considerations of partisanship, in some degree temperamental, in some degree the result of political strife and personal rivalry, they singled out data favorable to their particular viewpoint, ignored or distorted whatever opposed it, and interpreted alleged facts with a supreme disregard for the eternal verities. Resident in lands where passion and ink were good friends, where political ideas were apt to have the force of religious creeds, history to the average Spanish-American historians of the time seemed to be present rather than past politics, a matter not to be written about or discussed, unless it could be employed to justify preconceived notions or promote the public fortunes of some individual or group. Indeed a sort of cult grew up about native historians, much as it did about national heroes. Because they declared that something was true, it must be true and none might question it.

Outside of Spanish America itself the relatively few writers who occupied themselves with its history long failed to determine the credibility of the materials they used. If they happened to choose the picturesque and romantic elements alone, they presented them with all the alluring glamour that gifted imaginations could conjure up, accepting the unchecked statement of early chroniclers as so much law and gospel. Often, also, these foreign historians utilized what they found as a means of stimulating prepossessions born of ancient grudges against Spain or of dislike for Spanish America. In any case they were prone to seek out the conventional and obvious "authority." Unaware of the circumstances under which the information had been assembled, they did little more than reproduce it in another language.

Since Spanish America does not belong as yet to the well-trodden domains of historical writing, a venture into it is a somewhat hazardous performance. Within its field of inquiry there is no such accumulation of reasonably authentic and well-

organized knowledge in English, French, and German, from which a prospective author can make needful selections, as in the commonly accepted divisions of history. Outside of certain narrow phases that have been examined, no mass of stock information in print exists in any language other than Spanish. Even here its reliability is apt to be questionable. For anyone, therefore, who is unfamiliar with Spanish to write a history of Spanish America would be about as sensible a procedure as it would be for a Chinaman to narrate the history of the United States on the basis of Chinese "authorities"! But an accurate knowledge of the language is not the only prerequisite. If the foreign historian is unacquainted with the characteristics of most of the Spanish-American writers, and with the circumstances under which they have assembled their data, his work cannot fail to reproduce the faults that they exemplify.

Though the history of Spanish America has suffered from neglect and misrepresentation alike, the fact does not lessen the

fascination that it possesses for all who enter upon a field of study so hidden from the common view. Because of its very obscurity it has all those elements of mystery which arouse and hold human interest. That it has been misunderstood and ill-interpreted is a greater inducement still for attempting a task of vindication with all the ardor and eagerness of the seeker after truth, who recks nought of consequences so long as he can attain his goal.

The story of Spanish rule in America, of the struggle for liberty from a foreign yoke, and of the rise and development of the eighteen republics that acknowledge the maternity of Spain suggests naturally a comparison in point of interest with the three similar phases in the evolution of the United States. No one who has sounded the depths of Spanish colonization can help feeling the intrinsic superiority of its attraction over the record of English activities. The latter seems drab and dull beside it. Not only were the personages, scenes, and circumstances so utterly different, but the actual conditions brought about by

the closeness of contact between the Spaniards and the native inhabitants of America, contrasted with the aloofness that characterized the relations of the English with the Indians, and the significance of this divergence in attitude and policy for later ages, render a study of Spanish achievements one of the most fascinating fields of inquiry imaginable. Above all, it is the persistence of the Spanish type of civilization, its ideas and institutions, its traditions and culture, its psychology, its customs and usages, in the face of the Anglo-Saxon type, which compels attention. What were its fundamentals? How did they develop? Wherein lies the secret of the strength of the Spanish spirit which prevails to the south of the United States, over against the powerful influences, mental and material, that emanate from the huge domains of Anglo-Saxonism in North America? These are questions that have never been adequately answered.

The Thirteen Colonies that severed their dependence upon Great Britain could all have been put into one of the smaller poli-

tical divisions of colonial Spanish America, into what is now the single republic of Colombia. Their population at the time was probably not a fifth of the number of inhabitants then subject to the rule of Spain. Their actual struggle for independence, carried on in a tiny area and under a single leader, lasted little more than six years, whereas the revolt of the Spanish colonies under many leaders and ranging over a vast territory endured for nearly twenty years. And if thrilling deeds of heroism and all that in war appeals to an imagination that blends romance with reality are what is desired, they abound beyond measure in the annals of the mighty conflict that caused the flag of Spain to be lowered forever on the western continents.

Then, when the former dominions in the New World given by Columbus to Castile and León entered upon their republican independence, a story begins which is one of the most interesting in human annals. Nowhere on earth is there gathered together such an array of states, politically separate and yet united in the essential

features of their civilization, as in Spanish America. Nowhere else can there be found such an extraordinary fusion of races with all that this signifies for the study of the share of each in molding national and popular character. It is the greatest sociological laboratory in existence. Moreover, the vicissitudes through which the republics have passed in adapting their inheritance to new conditions; the problems of every description that have arisen; the manifold experiments that they have tried, the ways in which they have struggled to win recognition from their fellow nations and the manner in which such recognition has been accorded; the contributions of their type of life and thought to the civilization of the world at large; the opportunities that they offer to men of enterprise from every land—these are themes that require an adequate knowledge of the past before present conditions can be understood.

Whatever can be done, accordingly, to focus public attention on the necessity of striking at the roots of the history of countries representative of a civilization so

different from ours and whose destinies are linked so closely with our own, deserves the heartiest recognition. Such a service is rendered by the Corbacho Collection of South American Historical Manuscripts. Exhibited three years ago in connection with the International Historical Congress at Buenos Aires, and very recently under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, it is now shown for the first time in New York. The entire collection, housed in the residence of its owner at Lima, Peru, numbers upwards of three hundred thousand items. It is undoubtedly the largest and richest of its kind in private hands to be found anywhere in the Americas. Some two thousand of the rarest and most interesting documents are here exhibited.

Señor Jorge M. Corbacho, by whose courtesy extended through The Hispanic Society of America this wealth of historical material is made known to the public of New York, is a member of the Peruvian Congress. Grandson of one of the great leaders in the struggle for the independence

of his native land, he traces his ancestry back to the proudest lineages of colonial times. It was the intimacy of his relationship to families whose careers were often identical with the history of Peru as colony and republic which gave him the impulse toward the work of collection. Endowed, also, with an unusually ardent sense of appreciation for records of the past, he entered upon a tireless search for material that might reveal how close the union of his kin and country was in patriotic thought and deed. Even as a boy of fourteen, at a time when other lads make hobbies of more ephemeral things, he interested himself in picking up as best he could various old documents that told about the achievements of the men who laid the foundations of Spanish civilization in South America, and guided its evolution through the centuries that have elapsed since the days when Europeans first trod the shores of the southern continent. Beginning at home with the manuscripts that recorded the career of his own family and then of its relatives, immediate and remote, he gradu-

ally broadened his activities of research until he had traveled far and wide through Peru itself and into the adjoining republics of Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile. Undaunted by a thousand and one obstacles of ignorance, uncertainty, inertia, suspicion, reticence, and reluctance, with which his pathway of investigation was beset, he left no means of access untried and lost no chance, however unfavorable it might seem, of adding a single item more to his stock.

How Señor Corbacho uncovered the hiding-places of the manuscripts that he has brought together is a story that affords a glimpse into the quaint customs of colonial times which still survive in many parts of Peru. The chief sources of his collection are family archives and stray papers gathered up by the Indians. Among the five or six million people who live scattered over a region easily the size of seven of our largest western states, somewhat less than a fifth perhaps is of Spanish origin. It includes many a family whose ancestral tree branches off from the "conquistadores,"

others descended from ancestors of high rank and station in the colonial service of Spain, still others from the protagonists in the drama of national emancipation. Revering the glories of long ago and venerating the memories of the men who had brought them renown, these families have striven zealously to preserve everything that might recall the achievements of their forefathers. They may dwell amid obscurity and poverty, secluded in a remote village or small town or in the narrow alleys or neglected streets of a city, tenanting a mansion which, though its gateway may be surmounted by an ancient escutcheon, is little more than a crumbling semblance of bygone splendor; and yet they piously set apart a room in which to keep their precious heirlooms. To these relics, whatever their nature, whether documents, portraits, furniture, articles of dress and adornment and the like, they cling with a tenacity which only the pressure of absolute want can loosen. Seldom shown even to intimate friends and still less to the casual visitor, many an object that would gladden the

heart of the collector of the rare and curious in art, history, and literature lies secreted away in the homes of the once wealthy and powerful, who guard the treasures of their traditions even while they struggle to eke out the bare requirements of physical existence. Only to him who has a lineage comparable with their own is access permitted, and the possibility afforded of acquiring now and then some of these mementos of the past. It is from the archival repositories of the proud old families of Peru that Señor Corbacho has drawn many of the finest manuscripts in his collection.

Less fruitful was his search among the Indians in mountain, hamlets and villages, far removed from road or railway. In the days of their ancestors, long before strange, bearded men-at-arms scaled the Andes and planted the banner of Spain on their heights, there was no knowledge of paper or of written characters. What the word of mouth could not convey was transmitted by a bundle of knotted cords of various colors and lengths. Thus it was, when

anything in the shape of a manuscript fell into the hands of the natives, they regarded it with superstitious awe. Were they to destroy it, vengeance from on high would surely be visited upon them. Unable to read or write and rarely taught to do so, no matter how and whether the influence of the European might penetrate in other respects, the bulk of the native inhabitants never became altogether accustomed to the handiwork of the men from another continent, who covered some unknown substance with mysterious signs that had an equally mysterious meaning. When they served as soldiers in the colonial militia or revolutionary armies, for example, and happened to find a bit of paper with such characters on it, they stored it away in some nook or cranny of their huts and kept it religiously. Here Señor Corbacho unearthed many a priceless document, and secured it with infinitely less trouble than he had had in learning where it was, or in persuading the scions of ancient Spanish lineage to yield something out of their ancestral hoard.

For twenty-one years the still youthful collector has kept unremittingly at his task, and cherishes the hope that he may increase the total number of his manuscripts to a million. Though the materials assembled thus far relate very largely to Peru and Bolivia, along with much that concerns Chile, Paraguay, and Argentina, he seeks to have the scope expanded so as to include all of the countries in Spanish South America. Whether he succeeds in his quest or not, it is his purpose, in 1921, to present practically the entire collection as a memorial to his native land on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of Peruvian independence. Out of it he will reserve only those portions which are valuable merely for the autographs they contain or which refer solely to neighboring states. By means of historical and archeological institutes, furthermore, which he proposes to create, and through the aid of the Society of Antiquaries which he has already founded, Señor Corbacho aims to carry the development of historical studies far beyond any point that has yet been reached in a

South American country through private initiative.

The measure of advantage that Peru may derive from a gift of this sort, and from the manifold uses to which it promises to be put, is not easy to estimate. A nation so rich, not in natural resources alone, but in monuments and memories of a past that ranges back into dim, prehistoric ages—so bestrewn with such relics in fact as to be a veritable “land of ruins”—cannot fail to possess a tremendous power of attraction for both archeologists and historians. Since its public archives were in large part scattered and destroyed during the disastrous war with Chile about forty years ago, the student finds among what it left comparatively little to interest him and the existing facilities for investigation too defective to warrant serious effort. Now, with the huge nucleus provided by the Corbacho Collection and the activities that are to proceed from it, the situation bids fair to undergo a vast improvement. Should the example thus set be followed by many other representatives of the ancient

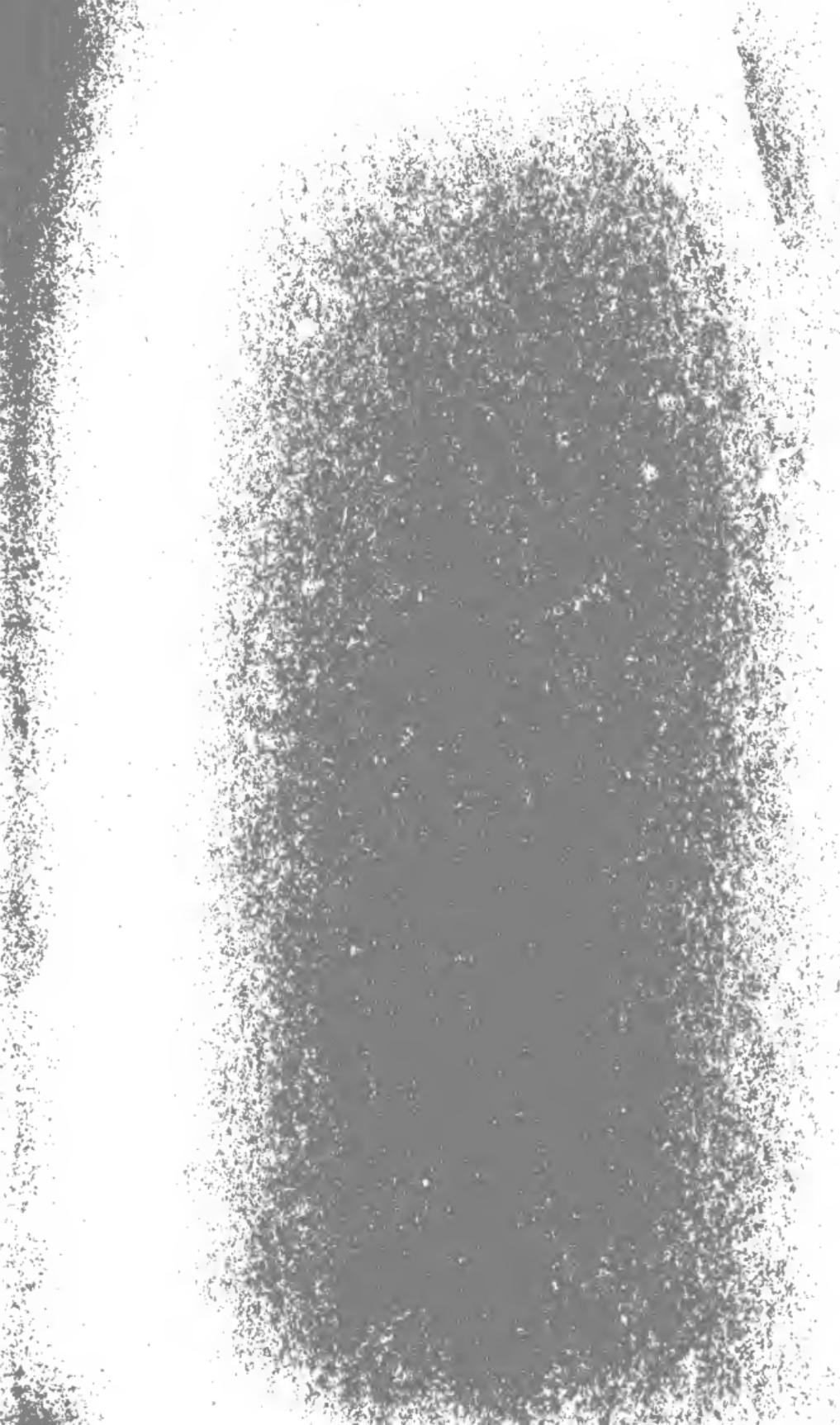
families of the country who may see fit to part with their ancestral treasures in the interest of the advancement of science, Peru is assured of becoming a great center of organized research in Spanish America.

The two thousand items selected by Señor Corbacho for the purpose of the present exhibition may be divided chronologically into two classes: those having to do with the era of the "conquistadores" and with events or personages of a somewhat later period, and those relating to the origin and development of the wars of independence. The latter are far more numerous. Geographically the collection is centered mainly about Peru and Bolivia. In making this choice out of the hundreds of thousands of documents in his collection, Señor Corbacho had the probable interests of Americans immediately in mind. He knew the pride that they take in the classic work of Prescott, which was the first to depict with all the masterly coloring of the artist inspired by his theme the valorous deeds of the Spanish conquerors who

created for Spain an empire beyond the seas. Their remembrance, also, of the patriots of the American Revolution, he felt sure, would kindle a warm sense of sympathy for the patriots of South America who fought no less gallantly on behalf of national independence.

By directing the attention of the American people to the documentary sources of so large a portion of the history of our fellow republics to the southward, Señor Corbacho has rendered a great service to the cause of international friendship throughout the Americas. He has made plain the obligation that rests upon our own countrymen and theirs to seek the truth where it may be found. He has pointed out the necessity of common effort between us to attain that knowledge of the present which only the authentic records of the past can supply. He has afforded us, finally, a vista through which we can look back upon the early history of European civilization in South America, and follow it onward through the stages of its development, culminating in the era of emancipation, when many a

youthful nation shook off, as our own had done, the political fetters that bound it to a land on the other side of the ocean, and started hopefully out upon its career of progress under the ægis of republican freedom.





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